

to facilitate the development of communities that are inclusive and compassionate. The shared experience of grief, openness towards different ways of responding to that experience, creating spaces to explore the range of emotions, and maintaining enduring relationships with those who have passed on can allow us to facilitate the development of communities that are inclusive and compassionate.

Manaaki, compassion, empathy and understanding are some of the most powerful human resources available to us within critical life moments, such as those prompted by death. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the communities in which we live are dynamic, diverse and multicultural. We are also becoming increasingly aware of our aging population and what this may mean for us now and in the future. These realities draw attention to the extent that current ideas and approaches will account for the diverse needs of people, whānau and their communities. We need to be particularly concerned with developing ways to enhance our shared capacities for empathy, care and compassion. As our everyday worlds change and evolve, so too must the pathways through which we support and care for bereaved communities.

#### Notes

1. J. Harré, *Māori and Pākehā: A Study of Mixed Marriages in New Zealand*, (Wellington: Reed, 1966).
2. See K. Edge, "Different Coloured Tears: Bicultural Bereavement Perspectives", (PhD Thesis, Waikato University, 2017), <https://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/handle/10289/11163>.
3. L. W. Nikora and B. Masters-Awatere, "Final Arrangements Following Death: Māori Indigenous Decision Making and Tangi," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 22, no.5. (2012): 400–413.
4. H. M. Mead, *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori Values* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2003), 29.
5. J. Ritchie, *Becoming Bicultural* (Wellington, New Zealand: Huia Publishers, 1992), 75.
6. K. Edge, "Different Coloured Tears: Bicultural Bereavement Perspectives," 20.
7. See R. A. Neimeyer, S. A. Baldwin and J. Gillies, "Continuing Bonds and Reconstructing Meaning: Mitigating Complications in Bereavement," *Death Studies*, 30, no.8 (2006): 715–738; N. R. Nowatzki, and R. Grant-Kalischuk, "Post-death Encounters: Grieving, Mourning and Healing," *Omega*, 59, no.2 (2009): 91–111.
8. C. Valentine, *Bereavement Narratives: Continuing Bonds in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Oxon, Great Britain: Routledge, 2008).
9. T. Walter, "A New Model of Grief: Bereavement and Biography," *Mortality*, 1, no.1 (1996): 7–25; T. Walter, "Grief and Culture," *Bereavement Care*, 29, no.2 (2010): 5–9.

## The Casketeers and prime-time tangihanga

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Prime-time media might be swimming with images of death and dying, but for most of us in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand the everyday practicalities of death, from the collection of the body of the deceased to its eventual interment or cremation, are an utter mystery. The critically-acclaimed observational documentary series *The Casketeers*, which first screened on TVNZ in January and February of 2018, seeks to rectify this – to normalise what goes on in funeral homes, so that we may be less anxious about what occurs to our loved ones, and to us, at the end of life.

The six-episode series follows the staff of Auckland-based Tipene Funerals as they go about the business of tending to the dead. Francis and Kaiora Tipene, the husband and wife team at the helm, are understated heroes who clearly adore their work. Francis is a soft-voiced, well-dressed poker-faced fussy with a tendency to give (and spend) generously, a devotion to detail that drives his staff to distraction and a wickedly deadpan sense of humour. The team arrive at a rest home to present some marketing ‘outreach’ in the form of waiata, poi and Samoan dance; ‘If someone should pass away while we are here,’ he says, ‘well, let’s just take the opportunity as it comes.’ Long-suffering, twinkly-eyed Kaiora, who acts as CFO, has the patience of Job and clearly keeps the whole operation afloat. Each episode focuses on the preparations of one or two individuals, weaving their stories through an account of the day-to-day operations of managing the business, which includes collecting the dead, arranging preservation and transportation, preparing the body for presentation, organising the funeral and overseeing burial or cremation.

Apart from its unusual subject matter, *The Casketeers* is a particularly illuminating example of the steps we need to take to negotiate the exploration and visual representation of that which is culturally delicate or tapu. It notably shares images of tangihanga and cross-cultural mourning that are rarely featured on New Zealand screens, interlacing humane and sensitive footage of Māori, Samoan and Tongan funerary rites, and the careful preparation of the deceased. Individual staff talk us through: Tongan funerals will last for hours, and the mourners’ funeral-specific ta’ovala – large, coarse and often torn or dirty woven mats, which are worn wrapped around the waist – make an accidental and righteous mess indoors, but it’s one that is representative of great love and beauty. Samoan families like mausoleums, but the abundance of the funerals can bankrupt families. Bodies of Māori must be carefully prepared given that people will touch and caress the tūpāpaku. Elsewhere, Francis notes

that Pākehā families are big on videos and powerpoint slideshows, which brings its own technological challenges.<sup>1</sup>

These scenes are offset by blackly comic subplots and delightfully tongue-in-cheek interviews with many of the staff at Tipene Funerals, for the series is peppered with scenes of dry workplace absurdity that channel mockumentary comedies such as *The Office*. Francis and cheery funeral director Scottie, both of whom are half-heartedly dieting, have a deeply reluctant session with a personal trainer in the parlour’s chapel, where they hope the large statues of Jesus, Mary and Joseph might give them divine inspiration. Kaiora talks us through Francis’s extravagant purchases with a sense of resignation. Exasperated funeral director Fiona rolls her eyes and sighs dramatically at Francis’s obsession with casket linings. Francis and handyman Feliki pimp out a white Buick hearse that Francis has christened ‘T4NGI’. The staff love each other – they are whānau – but gosh they piss each other off. The show is gutting, then immensely tender, then spit-your-tea-out funny.

What results is a carefully directed and edited manipulation of tension and release – an emotional pressure valve that frames the funeral process as joyful and life-affirming by both honouring the dead and celebrating the living. Director Susan Leonard’s sense of humour and restraint is truly admirable, but composer Karl Steven is perhaps the show’s unsung hero in this regard, for his deft scoring facilitates sometimes quite incongruous tonal shifts. The music transitions between comic percussion, clarinet, bells and quirky pizzicato strings for sequences that channel the gentle, absurd comedy of *The Great British Bake Off* or *Father Ted*, and rich, moving orchestrations of cello and piano accompany more serious sequences such as the dressing of bodies or the funerals themselves.

The subplot of episode four is typically hilarious, high stakes stuff: which criminal has been stealing the biscuits that are set aside for the grieving families? Fiona is culprit number one, as half a bag of Farmbakes is ‘conveniently’ stashed on her shelf – a set up? – but funeral assistant Logan is also in the firing line. There’s a good deal of finger-pointing and suspicion, especially as half of the staff are meant to be counting calories. By the end of the episode, though, Francis channels Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo, who famously wrote in his confessions, ‘give me chastity and continence, but not yet’. With a sense of weariness, Francis finally admits to the interviewer that the corruption of the ‘biscuit raruraru’ starts at the root: ‘I should practice what I preach, I

should lead from the top, but time and time again I find myself in Fiona's shoes – hungry – a monster – then the monster steals from the cookie jar ... Sometimes I eat the biscuits.' It's a moment of exquisite comedy and perfect timing, and in its embrace of human fallibility it's also a fine example of humour as social work.

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*The Casketeaders'* interest in bringing varied images of funeral and mortuary practice into the home highlights how limited the representation of death is in contemporary television. With the exception of the much-loved American funeral home comedy-drama *Six Feet Under*, which ran from 2001–5, when we see the time between death and the funeral on television in Aotearoa New Zealand it is usually within the context of criminal activity, horror or violence.<sup>2</sup> Within such storytelling, dead is not necessarily dead. In particular, the familiar and perhaps comforting narrative patterns of the police procedural, with its fixed running times and need for narrative resolution, creates space for the deceased victim to 'speak' to their demise. More often than not, the body is that of someone who has died suddenly, or who has been victimised, which means that the cadaver sits uncomfortably as an object of both fascination and horror, as the 'silent witness' to something terrible. Funeral practices are effaced in lieu of legal and medical ones; the body belongs to 'the system' and the story, and not the family. The clinical, professional environment of the mortuary itself acts as a liminal space in which the usual taboos around death and representation fragment, just as the narrative conventions of the crime drama might juxtapose stark images of the dead against flashback footage of the living victim-to-be, in the hope that the point of death itself might become untangled and illuminated.

At the most comic end of this representational spectrum the mortuary is a site of clandestine absurdity, where oddball detectives are able to solve crimes in an unconventional manner. In the American comedy *iZombie*, which has screened in New Zealand since 2015, Liv – an aptly named undead medical resident – surreptitiously nibbles on the brains of the deceased, which she first douses in hot sauce to add some flavour. This allows her to access their memories and find clues to the victims' deaths, but she also temporarily, comically, inherits some of their personality traits. At the other end come dour, stylised forensic procedurals such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–2015) and its myriad offshoots, in which the victim's ruined body becomes a dehumanised, objectified puzzle box.

The use of computer-generated anatomical effects grants us a penetrating, exclusive God's eye view into the body of the victim that breaches corporeal boundaries, fetishising science and technology and reifying the omnipotent power of the justice system. Too often these programmes also eroticise images of young dead women, offering a queasy Gothic spectacle alongside the pursuit of justice,<sup>3</sup> and mingling voyeurism with disgust. As Francis notes in a radio interview, 'at the movies, you know – they show you the steel table with a dead body on a head block – it's hardly like that, not at all'.<sup>4</sup> *The Casketeaders* is presented instead as a kind-hearted, humane pop-cultural corrective to decades of stark, undersaturated TV autopsies and stock images of blank-faced corpses being rolled out of refrigerated drawers.

Nonetheless, for all the show's interest in demystifying the funeral trade, there remains a clear and significant taboo: the corpse itself. *The Casketeaders* goes to great pains to ensure that the dignity and the humanity of the deceased and their families is protected, so it is notable that the period of time between the body being first uplifted and then later dressed and made up for presentation is largely elided – bar a quick comedic aside in one episode, when we learn that Francis has (oops) picked up the wrong body. As opposed to fictional accounts of death and dying, which position the cadaver as an object of regard, this is a documentary about how the living encounter death in which the deceased themselves rarely appear.

If the administration of death and funerary practice is a type of gentle theatre, then when we do peer into the embalmer's work space it is like a quick, illicit peek behind the curtain to see the machinery powering the special effects. In episode two we meet Astriss, the technician who will take responsibility for embalming a young mother who has died of a gunshot wound and ensure that the tūpāpaku will remain safe and presentable for the duration of the tangi. After the funeral home's tasteful decorations and soft lighting, the frank, industrial space of the mortuary, with its stainless-steel fixtures, bright lights and hazardous chemical warnings, comes as something of a shock.

Although embalming's outcome is a well-presented body, the process itself is a mucky and clinical business that acknowledges our fragile, undignified materiality – the fact that we are creatures of flesh and blood who will swiftly decompose, if given half a chance. This creates a challenge for televisual storytelling. Even if images of corpses were not already overlaid with cultural and ethical prohibitions, then the process

of setting a dead person's features is far less TV-friendly and culturally appropriate than the beautiful, tragic image of Francis and Fiona, standing in the pouring rain, singing while a tiny infant is buried because no family members could attend the funeral. Astriss's blue scrubs and white gumboots are a far cry from Francis's beautifully tailored suits.

This sequence is short, really, nothing much more than a drop-off and some admin. Much like scenes elsewhere in the series in which the funeral directors collect one body from customs and prepare another for transportation to Niue, it illustrates some of the calm, everyday logistics of death. It is telling that the filmmakers quickly cut to interview footage, for this serves to humanise the embalming process. Female embalmers, Francis warmly notes, are 'awesome', and have a pronounced delicacy and attention to detail. Astriss also comments to the interviewer about how hard it is to be confronted with the body of someone so close to her own age, and her voiceover accompanies footage of her putting on her apron and respirator. She moves away from the camera through into the workroom, and Francis closes the door behind her, shielding us from her work.

'I suppose at the end of the day I feel grateful', says Francis, sombrely, back in the car. He talks of the challenges of working with the bodies of people who have been very sick, who have died suddenly, and who have needed post-mortem examinations. 'I'm just so grateful I'm alive' he says; 'I'm here today... [and] there are some children without a mother as of yesterday.' The show cuts to a break, and when we return we're back, neck-deep, in the middle of a silly, absurd storyline in which Francis tries to teach Feliki how to drive an outrageously crappy manual transmission van he's bought from some backpackers. By the end of the episode the lemon has gone to car heaven, and the staff film the busted-up vehicle with their cell phones as it is uplifted by the wreckers, Francis's pride somewhat dented even while his largesse remains intact. 'You pay peanuts, you get a monkey. Is that true?' Francis muses. 'Yeah.'

The documentary footage, then, and the episodes' narrative structure, dance a fine line between visibility and concealment – an acknowledgement of both the physical presence of the dead, and the cultural prohibitions around their visual representation. These representational issues speak to the way that the corpse itself can be seen as an unsettling 'boundary' object. Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva writes that the cadaver is a perfect example of the 'abject'.<sup>5</sup> Here, abjection speaks to something that conceptually dances between us,

what we think of as 'our-self', and the world of objects, everything that is not-us. The abject, as a strange, in-between category, is something that inspires revulsion, and that we reject at a gut level; think, for instance, about the strange feeling of disassociation that occurs when you look down at a wound or injury, and experience your body as both truly you, and as a fragile, treacherous, and even foreign leaky object. The corpse, then, is an uncanny thing that we see as simultaneously utterly familiar and unsettlingly foreign, and it challenges the way that we think of ourselves as whole. It is a site of profound cognitive dissonance, which perhaps reminds us of the inevitability of death and dissolution, let alone our own corporeal fragility. As such, the ways we choose to tend to the bodies of the dead speaks strongly to our desire and need to mitigate the inescapable process of decomposition, with all its attendant issues and risks, but also to the spiritual, emotional and psychological payload of the existence of the corpse itself.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, while *The Casketeers* is a documentary about how we practically deal with the death of our loved ones and the funeral rites, it must also find a way to negotiate the ultimate taboo – the existence of the body itself. How do you visually represent that which cannot be seen? How do you tonally ensure that the most hidden parts of funeral preparations don't become maudlin, morbid or even offensive? Here, the documentary makers exercise great restraint. Scenes are filmed carefully, sympathetically, so that caskets, door frames, sheets and members of staff obscure the deceased. Instead, we are offered short, fragmented views of the 'clients': we see a curl of hair, clasped hands, the buttoned front of a waistcoat, socks and camo pants, a pounamu pendant. Such brief visual reminders serve two functions: we see enough of the deceased that we are not left to fill that sometimes aching conceptual gap ourselves, and the glimpses of the deceased ensures that they are granted a sense of personality and humanity. The subjects, although dead, are people, not objects. Each episode begins with a whakatauki and ends with a dedication to those whose preparations have been featured; dignity is embraced and mana is retained.<sup>7</sup>

More importantly, we see the care and aroha shown to the tūpāpaku by Francis, Kaiona and their staff as they make preparations. Bodies are lifted into caskets with a gentle 'hang on . . . haere mai, haere mai.' With an empathy and focus that is utterly wrenching, Francis carefully straightens the hair and applies cosmetics to the face of Chozyn, the young mother who has been shot, as she lies in state, awaiting her family. We see



Aunty Kanaraina's sheepskin slippers next to the clean white satin of the casket's lining; 'Aunty, I'm just going to position you so that you look amazing for the people . . . that red is very striking, eh!', Francis tells her, complimenting her scarf, before applying some decorous but potentially controversial neutral lipstick. We may not literally see the deceased, but we see how the *staff* see them – as beautiful, as loved, as whānau and friends, whose physical presence is a gift to be cherished. It's a frank and loving engagement with death that is otherwise absent from our screens, and it positions *The Casketeers* as a culturally significant window into the care and representation of the dead in Aotearoa.

In episode three, Francis is on a mission. The groundskeeper at Mangere Lawn Cemetery has a big boy toy, a monstrous 'ultra high-performance' Stihl 650 backpack leafblower, and Francis desperately wants a go. 'Oh....' he sighs with pleasure as he blasts piles of leaves from the asphalt with the power of the gods; 'Is it okay that we're blowing it on the graves?' To the interviewer, after: 'I really need one of these. I really need one. It was so awesome.' He thinks it will be a great investment – 'My farts blow louder than my little Makita!' he mutters later – but practical, fiscally minded Kaiora is yet to be convinced, seeing as leafblowers (three!) are piling up as quickly as the grease-stained brown paper wrappers of the baked goods that Francis guiltily snacks on. 'Come back to me in another . . . mmm . . . six months', says Kaiora, dryly. 'She's so mean', sighs Francis to the camera.

Francis's perfectionist obsession with cleaning up the leaves outside the funeral parlour – or, as he puts it, his ongoing tussle with Tāwhirimātea, the god of weather – becomes a delightful running gag throughout the series. The incongruous opening shot of episode one is one that wouldn't be out of place in a po-faced ironic indie comedy, as Francis, impeccably dressed, walks slowly across the screen, his poor wee Makita in hand, puffing away at the sparse handful of withered leaves that are sully his car park. In an interview on RNZ National, after the series has aired, Francis and Kaiora even talk about how many phone calls they've had, with #teamfrancis berating Kaiora for being stingy, and #teamkaiora telling her to hold her ground.<sup>8</sup>

The fallen leaves are more than a source of humour, though. They become a sweet and touching metaphor for mortality itself. *The Casketeers* exhibits a rare sense of humanity that acknowledges the myriad ways

that we encounter and grapple with the practicalities of death. It shines a light on diverse, cross-cultural funeral practices, and it emphasises the importance of humility and compassion. It couples dignity with a cheeky irreverence that is hugely life-affirming. It allows us to look, but from a respectful distance. Leaves will always fall, true, but there will always be someone to clear them up, to ensure that things are neat and tidy, and to protect a space for care and aroha in a world where sorrow and grief is an unavoidable part of life.

## Notes

1. Britt Mann, "A Day in the Life of a Māori Funeral Director," *Stuff*, January 13 2018, accessed April 30 2018, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/tv-radio/99638453/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-mori-funeral-director>. [sic]

2. Gary Laderman offers a brief history of the funeral home in American popular culture in *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*, in which he notes that morticians and undertakers have generally been presented as dour stereotypes or as stock figures in horror narratives, and that funeral homes themselves become sites of 'murder and mayhem' (Oxford University Press, 2003), 176.

3. Sue Tait, "Autoptic Vision and the Necrophilic Imaginary in CSI," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1, (2006): 45–62.

4. RNZ, 'The Casketeers: Putting the Fun into Funerals,' *Sunday Morning*, RNZ National, February 25, 2018, accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/sunday/audio/2018633594/the-casketeers-putting-the-fun-into-funerals>.

5. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3–4.

6. Ibid., 108–110.

7. We can find an interesting and complementary example in PRN Films' 2009 documentary *Donated to Science*, which looks at individuals who wish to donate their bodies to the Otago Medical School, the reactions of their families, and the experiences of the medical students who learn anatomy by working on cadavers. The documentary follows the donors' bodies throughout the entire process, juxtaposing interviews with the donors, their families and the students with footage from anatomy classes, starting with students' initial introduction to the cadavers that will be 'theirs', and finishing, nearly two years later, after the classes have finished, with the students seeing interview footage of the donors for the first time. The clinical and educational setting means that frank and intimate images of the prosected and dissected cadavers are contextualised in a much different manner than in *The Casketeers*. Nonetheless, both documentaries offer similar perspectives on death and corporeality that emphasise humanity, generosity and dignity – the personhood of the deceased – while also exploring the complex tangle of emotions that people must confront when working with the bodies of both the living and the dead.

8. RNZ, "The Casketeers: Putting the Fun into Funerals"